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THE RISINGS IN THE ENGLISH MONASTIC TOWNS IN 1327

IN comparing the municipal history of England with that of the Continent, during the Middle Ages, several important points of difference suggest themselves. One of these, and perhaps the most striking, is that in English towns as a general rule there were few such fierce party struggles as occur, for example, in the history of even the smallest German city. The democratic character of English municipal government prevented, save in rare instances, any oppression by powerful patricians, or the formation of bitterly hostile factions in the town. In addition, the royal prerogative in England was too potent and far-reaching to allow of any such disorders.¹ But the municipal history of England, nevertheless, is not altogether devoid of a series of factional conflicts. The history of one class of English towns is for over three centuries the history of long and bitter struggles, and violence and bloodshed fill their annals. The class of towns referred to is the monastic class, those under monastic control, and the struggles are those which were made by the townsmen to obtain liberties and franchises from their lords.

The status of the English monastic towns was a peculiar one. They were not full-fledged boroughs, according to the best authorities of to-day, nor can they be relegated, save in a few exceptional cases, to the rank of mere market-towns or manors.² Most of them were free boroughs by royal charter, but they were under the close and constant control of the abbot or prior of the monastery in their midst.³ The chief concern of the burgesses was to lessen this control, and to win for themselves the right of complete self-government, owing allegiance to the royal authority alone. Naturally enough, the monks withstood all such demands for greater

¹ Gross, *Gild Merchant*, I. 106, 285; Hegel, *Städte und Gilden*, p. 114. There are, it is true, a few examples of party strife in English towns, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, for which see C. W. Colby, *The Growth of Oligarchy in English Towns*, in the *English Historical Review*, 1890.

² Stubbs, *Const. Hist.*, I. 407-409, 425-426; Pollock and Maitland, *History of English Law*, I. 641-642; Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond*, p. 217.

³ For pictures of life in a monastic town see: Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Abbot Sampson of Bury St. Edmunds); Froude, *Annals of an English Abbey* (St. Albans), in *Short Studies*; Green, *Abbot and Town* in *Studies in England and Italy*; and *Cornhill Magazine*, VI. 858.

liberty, and during the thirteenth century, and in the opening years of the fourteenth, there were serious conflicts between the antagonistic forces of monasticism and communalism.¹

It was, however, at the beginning of Edward III.'s reign that the crisis in the struggle came, and the year 1327 is marked by the number of risings which then took place. The political and social conditions in England during the latter part of Edward II.'s reign were deplorable, and the tendency to turmoil and rebellion was everywhere apparent throughout the realm. Especially was this the case in monastic towns and manors, and with the deposition of the weak king and the accession of his young son everything seemed favorable to an outbreak. The central power was weak and ineffective, and the whole country was in a state of lawlessness. It was not strange, therefore, that the burgesses in several of the most important monastic towns rose in open revolt, and seized the opportunity presented to throw off the yoke of their lords, and that they made a violent and long sustained effort towards liberty. In their struggle they were encouraged, no doubt, by the bold stand against the royal power made, at this time, by the citizens of London, emissaries from whom, in several cases, even came and invited the men of other towns to revolt against their lords.² So general, in fact, does the movement seem to have been, that one of the most reliable of the St. Albans chroniclers, in speaking of the troubles that took place there, informs us that the townsmen, in rising against the abbot and convent, were following the example of the communities of cities, boroughs and towns, which, acting with unbridled audacity, endeavored to extort charters and liberties from their lords.³ The contemporary evidence of widespread disorder and rebellions seems to warrant such a statement, for everywhere throughout England there were disturbances and risings, though it is only with several of the chief risings in the monastic towns that this article aims to deal.

One of the most violent outbreaks took place in the town of St. Albans in Hertfordshire. There had already been half a century of conflict there between abbey and town, and the burgesses were eager and ready for a fresh revolt of an even more violent nature than any of the preceding ones. The *inferiores*, or lower class of townsmen, banded themselves together by oath to resist the abbot,

¹ Mrs. J. R. Green, *Town Life in the Fifteenth Century*, II. Chap. 9; Thompson, *Essay on Municipal History*, pp. 20 ff.

² *Gesta Abbatum Sancti Albani*, R. S., II. 156.

³ "Quorum sequentes exemplum, civitatum, burgorum et villarum communitates, et irrefrenatam assumentes audaciam chartas et libertates. . . a dominis suis per vim et violentiam extorquere nitebantur." Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 156.

being encouraged in this by several of the Londoners sent to St. Albans for this purpose. The *maiores*, or better class of townsmen, pretended to be on the side of the abbot, yet, secretly, they encouraged and aided the malcontents. Just on the eve of the outbreak the Earl of Lancaster came to St. Albans with a powerful retinue. The *maiores*, afraid for the success of their plans, sent a deputation of twelve burgesses to the abbot begging him neither to mention the sworn league nor to make any complaint to the earl. They, on their part, promised to see to it that matters in dispute would proceed peaceably and by way of law. Relying on these assurances the abbot allowed the earl to depart without asking his aid against the rebelliously minded townsmen.¹

The next day saw the opening of hostilities on the part of the townsmen, and proved how fallacious the abbot's trust in their promises had been. A servant of the abbot being attacked and pursued by the mob, in the streets of the town, slew one of his adversaries and escaped. Thereupon the townsmen rose *en masse* to assert their liberties. They erected a scaffold in the market-place and attaching an axe to it by a chain, they declared that all who were unwilling to join them should be beheaded there.² On the morrow the same twelve townsmen, who had so earnestly besought the abbot not to call on the earl for assistance, came to him again, and, in the name of the community of St. Albans, they asked him to grant them certain rights and liberties contained in the petition which they presented. This petition consisted of seven articles, and the demands made show clearly what it was that the burgesses in most ecclesiastical towns struggled for so fiercely. The first article asked for a general restoration of charters and liberties, of which the townsmen believed themselves to have been deprived and for proof of which they appealed to the Domesday record. They wished to be "as free as any borough or burgesses." Then, in the articles following, they went on to ask for the restoration of certain specific rights which they declared that they had formerly enjoyed. They wished to be allowed to send two burgesses, elected by themselves, to represent them in Parliament; also to respond by twelve burgesses, without a commixture of outsiders, before the justices in eyre; to take the assize of bread and beer in the town through twelve of their own number; to have the right of common in lands, woods, waters, fish-ponds and other privileged places, as was contained in Domesday; to have hand-mills for grinding their corn, and to be indemnified for the losses they had sustained through being de-

¹ *Gesta Abbatum*, R. S., II. 156-157.

² *Ibid.*, "ut qui nollent consentire illorum molitionibus, ibidem capite plecterentur."

prived of them ; and, finally, they demanded that the town-bailiff should make all executions in the town without being interfered with by the bailiff of the abbot's liberty or any other person.¹

The abbot would not immediately concede what the townsmen demanded, but requested a delay of four days in which to consider the matter. The townsmen were, however, so impatient that they would allow him but one day, and as soon as that had expired they appeared with the articles again and demanded an immediate answer. A verbal consent to the articles was all that they could extort from the abbot, and the deputies retired in great indignation. With a wise foresight the abbot had retained the services of two hundred armed men, as a garrison for the monastery. Then when the evening came and the townsmen attacked the abbey at one of the chief gates they were repulsed by the forces within. Then followed a ten days' siege ; but the inmates being well supplied with water and provisions, and all attempts to assault being met and repulsed, the townsmen got little satisfaction. Finally a royal writ was procured to be issued to the sheriff of Hertfordshire bidding him, if necessary, to levy the *posse comitatus* and relieve the abbey and its inmates. The king's peace was to be proclaimed in the town, and all who afterwards resisted were to be arrested and imprisoned. The townsmen dared not resist the royal proclamation, and quietly dispersed to their homes. They still held to their purpose of obtaining borough liberties, however, and their sworn confederation was maintained, as in London and other towns.²

Legal measures were next resorted to by the townsmen to gain recognition of their liberties, and they engaged lawyers to urge, in the royal court, their grievances against the abbot, who for his part took similar action. It looked as if the matters in dispute would be peaceably settled by the royal justices. The townsmen evidently feared the outcome of such a suit, and arranged instead to have a conference, to settle the differences, held in St. Paul's Churchyard some weeks later. Such dilatory proceedings did not appeal to the rabble of St. Albans, however, and while negotiations were pending between the abbot and the better class of burgesses, a fresh outbreak occurred in the town. The abbey was attacked but the rioters were again repulsed, and one of their number captured and thrown into prison. In London, meanwhile, things

¹ The full text of this interesting petition from the burgesses can be seen in the *Gesta Abbatum S. Albani*, R. S., II. 157-158. These do not seem to have been excessive demands on the part of the townsmen, but they had never enjoyed them in the past, as they claimed to have done.

² *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 159-160, where the royal writs to the sheriff are given in full.

seemed to be going in favor of the townsmen. A writ was issued in their favor, in which the abbot and his bailiffs were blamed for depriving the burgesses of their liberties, contrary to Magna Charta,¹ and were forbidden to further molest them in the enjoyment of their rights.²

Another writ was issued to the Treasurer and Chamberlain directing them to inspect the Domesday Book to find whether or not the town of St. Albans should be a free borough and the men of the town free burgesses. The result of such an inspection showed clearly and conclusively that the town belonged to the abbey, for the forty-six burgesses mentioned therein all held from the abbot, and owned but half a hide collectively. This was a decided setback to the claims of the townsmen.³

The next step was the conference in St. Paul's Churchyard, where, after some discussion, twelve arbitrators were agreed on: knights, lawyers and men from the country around St. Albans. These undertook to consider the demands of the townsmen for greater liberties, and were aided in their deliberation by three nobles from the royal council. After long debate an indenture was drawn up by the arbitrators, which was more favorable to the townsmen than to the abbot, but the final composition was put off until later. The events up to this point had occupied the first three months of 1327 and now, on the sixth of March, the parties met in the Abbey Church at St. Albans to agree to a final composition. The abbot and convent solemnly produced the charter granted to them by Henry II., which confirmed them in possession of the town of St. Albans, with a market and every liberty which a borough ought to have.⁴ The word *burgus* in the charter roused the interest of all the townsmen present, and they immediately demanded to have the status of burgesses confirmed to them under the sign and seal of the convent. The monks hesitated and held back, and the matter was postponed for four days, so that it could be discussed before the royal council and the wiser heads of the realm at Westminster.⁵ At this important conference the abbot and convent were represented by three monks and a professor of civil law. After many disputes and

¹ Magna Charta, section 13: "Praeterea volumus et concedimus quod omnes aliae civitates, et burgi, et villae, et portus, habeant omnes libertates et liberas consuetudines suas."

² *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 161.

³ *Ibid.*, II. 162-163; for the entry in *Domesday Book* concerning St. Albans see *D. B.*, p. 132.

⁴ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 164. This charter of Henry II.'s seems to have been the only one of importance possessed by the abbot and convent who, no doubt, relied largely on prescriptive right.

⁵ *Ibid.*, II. 165.

controversies, both parties consented to an indenture, or agreement, of the following nature. Twenty-four of the more faithful townsmen of St. Albans were to be chosen to make a perambulation of the town limits, and after considering and noting the ancient boundaries they were to report the result to the abbot and convent. These, on their part, agreed to confirm, by their common seal, such boundaries, having first given seisin of them, to the burgesses of the town.¹

The perambulation was accordingly made, and the indenture between the abbot and the burgesses drawn up. The royal assent and confirmation were given on April 19, the burgesses making fine of forty shillings,² and it only remained to get the abbot and convent to set their seal to the agreement. The burgesses brought to bear every possible pressure, but the monks delayed and were unwilling. A royal mandate came to them ordering them to confirm the agreement,³ yet they were bitterly opposed to any concession. and at a meeting in the church of St. Albans there was great opposition to sealing the document. Headed by their archdeacon the monks drew up a solemn protest against the conventual seal being used. It was in vain that the timid and terrified old abbot, Hugh of Everisdene, displayed the royal mandate. The monks, though greatly alarmed, still maintained their resolute attitude and left the chapter-house without yielding. It was only through the urgent entreaties of their abbot, and the imminent danger in which they were placed, that they at length gave in and allowed the convent seal to be used. A protest was, indeed, drawn up and recorded before two notaries public, which declared that this concession was made through fear of violence and not of their own free will.⁴

The indenture, thus won from the abbot and convent, and confirmed by the King, was a document of great importance to the burgesses of St. Albans. It set forth the metes and bounds of the borough in detail. St. Albans was henceforth to be a borough, without dispute ; all tenements were to be burgage tenements ; and all the inhabitants, their heirs and successors, were declared to be burgesses. Two burgesses were to be elected to represent the town in parliament, and twelve before the itinerant justices. The townsmen were, however, bound to appear at the abbot's hundred court, when summoned by writ, as formerly. The assize of bread and ale, and all articles having to do with the assize, were hence-

¹ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 165.

² Pat. Roll. 1 Edw. III., II, m. 28 ; *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 170.

³ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 174, where the royal letter is given in full.

⁴ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 170-175. Both the seal of the convent and the seals of individual burgesses were attached to this document. St. Albans did not yet possess a corporate seal.

forth to be held and made by presentment of twelve burgesses. The bailiff of the town was to make executions within the town, and if he failed to do this, the bailiff of the hundred was to replace him temporarily. Certain of the provisions safeguarded the rights of the abbot and convent. No hand-mills were to be allowed, and the burgesses had still to bring their corn to be ground at the abbot's mill. Such services as these were to remain unchanged, and the abbot and convent could seize any hand-mills set up against their authority.¹

The townsmen of St. Albans, as the result of their agitation in 1327, had undoubtedly won a victory and successfully asserted their liberties. Had they been content with this it would have been well for them, but their good fortune proved too much for them and by pushing matters to extremes they prepared a way for the resumption of the abbot's authority in the town. The story of the reaction in favor of the monastic corporation can be briefly told. The burgesses soon began to abuse their newly won liberty. First of all they forced the abbot to grant them rights of common in Barnet wood, and then they proceeded to destroy many trees and hedges there. They invaded the abbot's warren and his fish-ponds, at pleasure; and in spite of the indenture, they set up some eighty hand-mills in the town.² Fortunately for the rapidly dwindling prosperity of the monastery Hugh de Everisdene, the aged abbot, died in the autumn of 1327, and a new and more energetic ruler succeeded him. This was the sagacious Richard de Wallingford, and under his wise and politic rule the burgesses were destined to lose all their lately acquired liberties. De Wallingford was economical and he reformed the monastery within and without, removing to distant cells of the abbey all monks who were favorably disposed towards the townsmen, or in any way connected with the town.³

The reaction did not take place immediately, and the encroachments on the abbot's rights continued. The townsmen refused to hold the view of frankpledge before the abbot's seneschal, or to act as jurors and present amercements, or to choose wardens for the assize of ale, but only for that of bread. The abbot, therefore, ordained that the view of frankpledge should be rigidly held by his sub-seneschal and bailiffs, and on the day that it was held four constables were appointed on behalf of the abbot for the four wards of

¹ The full text of the indenture and agreement is given in the *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 166-170; the *Lords Journals (Eng. Parl. Papers)*, LVI. 1105; *Eng. Parl. Papers*, 1826, IX. 9-10; Clutterbuck, *History of Hertfordshire*, I. 22 ff.

² *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 175-176.

³ *Ibid.*, II. 202; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, pp. 184, 191, 272, 364.

the town, and under each constable two capital pledges were to act. At the same time other regulations tending to consolidate the abbot's judicial power in the town were settled. He also showed his power by forcing several of the townsmen, who held from him by such service, to supply horses for his journey to the cell at Tynemouth.¹

The burgesses of St. Albans were, meanwhile, making the most of the liberties they had won. A common seal for the borough, of silver throughout, was procured. Representatives were sent to Parliament, and to pay their expenses, and to support their newly won liberties, heavy contributions had to be levied in the town. Such expense was cheerfully borne now that they were free from the abbot's control, however, and they were prepared to stoutly resist any claims to jurisdiction over them on the part of the ecclesiastics. On his part the abbot was secretly planning to reassert his authority, and after three years of quietness the opportunity came; the two parties were again in conflict, but this time the ecclesiastics emerged triumphant from the fray.

A disturbance, caused by the abbot's attempting to exert his spiritual authority over the townsmen, took place in the spring of 1331. Two lives were lost and the royal coroner took cognizance of the matter.² An inquisition was ordered at the request of the abbot, who preferred charges against the burgesses for the many wrongs he had suffered at their hands.³ The verdict was entirely in the abbot's favor and reviewed the whole cause of the trouble since 1326, showing how the townsmen had made a confederation against the abbot; how they had extorted money and lands from various persons friendly to the convent; and how they had committed many outrages and acts of violence.⁴ Sixty-nine of the chief burgesses being arrested, thirty of them were adjudged guilty and thrown into prison. From thence they were released, on promising to pay a fine to the abbot. Those burgesses who had set up hand-mills, contrary to the abbot's rights, were prosecuted,⁵ and altogether Abbot Richard made life unpleasant for his tenants. It was no wonder, therefore, that the burgesses became weary of the struggle, and resolved to submit and effect a reconciliation with the abbot on the best terms possible. These terms were hard ones for them to offer:—the indenture of liberties gained in 1327 was to be surrendered and destroyed; there were to be no more hand-mills set up in the town; a large sum of money was to be paid as an indem-

¹ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 205–208.

² *Ibid.*, II. 216–219.

³ *Ibid.*, 221–222.

⁴ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 229–233.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 233–236.

nity for expenses incurred by the abbot and convent; and, finally, the townsmen were to give surety for future good behavior, both on their own part and on the part of their successors.¹ The burgesses themselves drew up these conditions. The abbot did not immediately assent to them, and the consequence was that the next day the representatives of the townsmen came to him again and surrendered unconditionally.² Their submission was accepted by the abbot, and although they soon repented of their hasty act, he kept the upper hand, and the submission was made unanimous.³

After surrendering their liberties to the abbot, thirty of the chief men of the town went to the royal chancery and there on their own behalf, and on behalf of the rest of the townsmen, they delivered up the royal confirmation and grant of liberties that had been conceded to them in 1327, and prayed that it might be cancelled, and the enrolment of it in the chancery records be blotted out.⁴ Accordingly the keeper of the rolls destroyed the charter and cancelled the enrolment of it. The silver seal of the borough was also surrendered and destroyed—the fragments being handed over to the monks to go towards restoring a ruined shrine.⁵ All the hand-mills in the town were surrendered to the abbot, and he, in token of the restoration of good will, gave a feast to the chief men of the town.⁶

Thus ended one of the greatest and most prolonged of efforts towards gaining borough rights and privileges, that was ever made by any monastic town in England. Beginning in the year of tumult and rebellion, 1327, it had lasted for three years or more, and had finally ended, in 1332, in the total discomfiture of the popular party at St. Albans. After having gained almost everything they sought for, the burgesses found themselves, in the end, outmatched by their powerful opponents, and they were forced to resign their dearly bought liberties. The power of the abbot and the convent over the town was re-established more firmly than ever, and it was not until almost half a century later that the townsmen again ventured to rise in rebellion, in sympathy with the great agrarian revolt of 1381.

¹ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 250–251.

² *Ibid.*, 251–254.

³ *Ibid.*, 254–255.

⁴ Close Roll, 6 Edw. III., m. 26d.

⁵ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 260; Madox, *Firma Burgi*, p. 140. Madox, though he gives an account of the surrender of the charter, totally misunderstood the motive of such action, as he thinks the burgesses were seeking to free themselves from the abbot's control.

⁶ *Gesta Abbatum*, II. 260–261.

Turning now to the history of another great municipal uprising which took place in the year 1327, we find at Bury St. Edmunds, in Suffolk, that almost similar occurrences to those at St. Albans took place. During the half-century preceding this revolt there had been three violent but unsuccessful attempts on the part of the burgesses to win self-government, and to control the jurisdiction in the town.¹ Now once again in the beginning of the year 1327 a fresh, and even more serious, revolt took place. As at St. Albans agents sent from London encouraged the townsmen to revolt. A small number of malcontents assembled themselves together in a tavern in Bury St. Edmunds, in January 1327, and from thence sent out a summons for the rioters to assemble. There were soon three thousand disaffected tenants and villains, gathered from all sides, and the abbey precincts were invaded and plundered. The convent officials, and several of the monks, were seized and imprisoned, and the rioters took away all the treasures of the abbey, the charters, muniments and papal bulls. Their chief desire was to destroy the bonds held against some of them by the abbot, which amounted in many cases to large sums. Having accomplished this work of destruction they proceeded to the gild-hall and there deposed their alderman, who had been elected under the abbot's control, and chose in his stead his more resolute brother, John de Berton. The new alderman was neither presented to the abbot and convent for confirmation, nor sworn in by the abbot's seneschal or steward. The gate-keepers of the town, who had been appointed by the abbot, were in like manner deposed and replaced by others chosen by the rioters.²

For several days the disturbances in the town went on increasing, and lawlessness prevailed everywhere. To overawe those who still held aloof from them, and especially the country people, the revolted townsmen erected a block, with an axe attached to it, and declared, precisely as those at St. Albans had done, that anyone refusing to join with them was to be there decapitated.³

The abbot, who had been absent attending Parliament, hastened back to the town to do what he could to quell the disturbance. Hearing of his return, the rebellious townsmen came to him and demanded that he should sign a charter of liberties they had drawn up. They would take no refusal and, finally, the abbot was forced to give in, and the charter was signed. By it the burgesses

¹ *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, ed. Arnold, R. S., Vol. II., Introd., pp. xli-xliv.

² *Memorials*, II. 329, III. 38-40.

³ *Ibid.*, II. 329, III. 38-39.

obtained the right to a community, a common seal, a gild merchant, and an alderman who was henceforth to be elected independently of the abbot.¹

The charter in its entirety is an interesting and valuable record of those rights for which so many English towns under monastic control strove for so long and valiantly in the Middle Ages. In its thirty-five articles we can see the grievances of the burgesses redressed as they wished to have them redressed. Besides the great community privileges, already mentioned, the burgesses of Bury St. Edmunds were to control their own taxation, to have the custody of minors and orphans in the town, and the appointment of the gatekeepers. The markets were always to be held in the same place as formerly, offensive amercements were to be done away with and freedom of trade was to exist in the town. Various regulations as to the sale and inheritance of land are to be found in this charter, and some of its clauses protected the burgesses from several objectionable forms of legal procedure, such as trial by battle, which was always a *bête noire* to the medieval townsmen. Another curious and, in England at least, unique clause was that which provided the burgesses with a sanctuary post, in the market-place of the town, whither all evil-doers could flee for safety and protection.²

In this borough charter of Bury St. Edmunds one point comes out clearly, and that is that there was to be a close connection, if not absolute identity, between the community of burgesses and the gild merchant of the town. Further it was provided by this charter that all the franchises and customs enjoyed by the burgesses in the former time were to be continued to them forever. The abbot and convent were obliged in addition to sign a release from all actions and transgressions committed by the townsmen, and to enter into bonds, to the amount of five thousand pounds, to be paid if the charter was not speedily confirmed by the King. Such terms as these seemed preposterous to the abbot, who returned to London, nominally to urge the King to ratify the charter, in reality to lay his wrongs before the newly summoned Parliament.³

The nobles and prelates assembled at Westminster advised the abbot to regard the terms of the charter as invalid and void, and not to have it either enrolled or confirmed.⁴ Several of the townsmen had followed the abbot to London, thinking that he would perfect the

¹ *Memorials*, III. App. H.

² For this charter see App. H. of the *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, Vol. III., where it is given with a translation from the original Anglo-Norman.

³ *Memorials*, III. 333. The Parliament of Edw. III. was summoned to meet at Westminster, January 7, 1327.

⁴ *Memorials*, III. 333.

agreement there, but learning of his resolve to stand by his rights as lord of the town, they returned in all haste to Bury enraged at what they considered his treachery. Fresh scenes of violence were enacted in the town, and allured by promises of freedom and plunder the whole countryside joined the rioters, so that a multitude of twenty thousand were assembled in and around the town. They pillaged the abbey's stores and made free with the carts, provisions and everything else belonging to the monks. All the lower elements of the population, men ever hostile to the great ecclesiastical corporation, were aroused. Parish priests and friars, hating the regular clergy, joined and headed processions of rioters, and when the abbot sent an envoy to Rome, for protection against such attacks, they, also, sent two of their number. The abbot's messenger died on the way; those sent by the other party probably never visited Rome, but returned with clumsily forged bulls, purporting to be from the Pope, favoring the claims of the townspeople. So palpable, however, were these forgeries that the two clerks who bore them were held up to scorn and derision by their comrades.¹

In the midst of these tumults a special mandate from the King bade both parties, under penalty of forfeiture of all they could forfeit, not to assemble armed men and to cease from attacking each other. Instead each side was to send two deputies to the King at York, to treat of a settlement of the disputes betwixt the abbey and the town.² This mandate was issued May 14, 1327, and the day fixed for the meeting was the second week in June. To the royal commands no attention was paid, it seems, by the townsmen, for ten days later the King took the abbey into his protection, and appointed two custodians, with power to arrest and imprison all offenders. No officers of the abbey were, however, to be removed so long as they were obedient and submissive.³ Two additional custodians were appointed two months later, in July, and during the summer attempts at reconciliation and mediation were made.⁴ Proctors sent by the monks and by the townsmen appeared before the king and through them any further breach of the peace was prohibited. When, however, the King was called to the Scottish border with his army, in the autumn of 1327, the townsmen of Bury St. Edmunds, in spite of the royal commands and protection granted to the abbot, broke out in fresh revolt.⁵ They were summoned together by the

¹ *Memorials*, II. 333-340; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, 213-214.

² *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, 151.

³ *Ibid.*, 106, 156.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

⁵ *Memorials*, II. 337-338; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, 214.

ringing of bells, and soon a vast multitude of people, of whom many were outsiders, were gathered together. The townsmen organized a confederation and swore to resist the abbot to the end. Then the conventual buildings were attacked, and either burned or in great part destroyed. The monks, driven desperate by these outrages, armed their servants and retainers and stoutly defended the remaining buildings. Under guise of treating of peace, however, the rioters captured twenty-four of the monks. These they cast into prison and menaced with death. Meanwhile equally riotous proceedings took place in twenty-two of the manors belonging to the convent. Property belonging to the monks was everywhere destroyed and encroached on. No attention whatever was paid to a second mandate from the King commanding a cessation of hostilities. The losses which the abbot and convent suffered at this time were enormous and beyond computation.¹

But assistance was at hand. The abbot had at last succeeded in securing a royal precept to the sheriff of Norfolk to quell the insurrection.² Thirty cart-loads of those arrested for their connection with the troubles were sent to Norwich to be tried, and four royal justices sat on the bench there. Several of the ringleaders expiated their misdoings on the gallows and many others were outlawed. The townsmen as a body were mulcted for damages in the sum of £140,000, an almost incredible amount for that time, and their representatives had to appear before the royal council and disclaim for themselves and their heirs any right to a *communitas*.³

The troubles were not yet ended, however. The outlawed members of the community bore a grudge against the abbot, Thomas de Draughton, whom they held to have perjured himself. These desperate men seized the abbot in his manor-house; conveyed him secretly to London, where he was left for some little time, and then had him taken over to Brabant, where he was left in confinement for many months. It was discovered that he had been abducted and the perpetrators were solemnly excommunicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Finally, in 1329, the poor abbot was discovered and brought back after his long captivity.⁴

No less than eleven different commissions and writs were issued in connection with the troubles at Bury St. Edmunds,⁵ and it was

¹ *Memorials*, II. 337-394; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, 213-214.

² *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, 213-214.

³ *Memorials*, II. App. A; III. 46-47. The *Cronica Buriensis* gives the damages awarded as being only £40,000, but this seems to be an error.

⁴ *Memorials*, II. 349-353. His abductors were certain of the townsmen, under the popular mayor, John de Berton, who had managed to break gaol.

⁵ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, pp. 193, 217-219, 411, 425.

not until five years after the first outbreak that everything was peaceably settled. By the *concordia*, or peace agreement, of the year 1331, a settlement was arrived at. The abbot, on promise by the townsmen of future good conduct and submission to his authority, by successive remissions excused the townsmen from all but a small part of the fine and damages. The extorted charter and other such grants were declared null and void. The townsmen again resigned all claim to a *communitas*. The treasures, documents and bonds taken from the abbey were largely restored to its possession and everything quieted down.¹

The burgesses of Bury St. Edmunds, like those of St. Albans, had failed completely to win for themselves either greater liberty or the right of self-government. A terrible lesson of obedience to their ecclesiastical lords had been taught them. The borough was still under the control of the abbot and was destined to remain so down to the time of the dissolution of monasteries. There were no further revolts that we know of, at Bury St. Edmunds, until the great rising of 1381.

The risings at St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds have long been known to students of English history. They have, however, been regarded rather as isolated instances of local disaffection than as examples of a widespread movement of monastic towns towards emancipation from ecclesiastical control. A number of cases of other risings lead to the view that the movement was a somewhat general one at this particular time. Most noteworthy amongst these additional risings is that of the burgesses of Abingdon, a town in Berkshire, not far from Oxford, which, likewise, occurred in the early part of the year 1327.²

Abingdon from the earliest times had belonged to the monks, and the control of the abbot was absolute. He had even been able to assert his privileges against royalty, and until the year 1327 there seems to have been little or no trouble with the townsmen. In the spring of that year, however, a very serious outbreak against the abbot's control took place. The male population of Abingdon township met together at the tolling of the bell of St. Helen's church. They gathered in the church porch and churchyard and took counsel together concerning their grievances against the abbot, especially in the matter of the market and market stalls, the absolute right to which was claimed by the monks. The discontented

¹ *Memoria's*, III. 41-46.

² The account given of the troubles at Abingdon is based, mainly, upon that in Wood's *Historia et Antiquitates Universitatis Oxoniensis*, Oxford, 1792-1796, pp. 161-163, though additional material has been gathered from MSS. in the British Museum and Public Record Office.

townsmen resolved to take violent measures and to incite a rebellion in the town. The meeting dispersed with threats of violence towards the abbey and its inmates, but the monks had some friends in the town who warned them to be on their guard.¹

This first meeting seems to have been held on a Monday, about the middle of May, and another meeting was called for the Wednesday night following. The people again assembled at the church of St. Helen, the parish church of Abingdon, when the bell tolled the hour of midnight. It was a midnight meeting of conspirators to organize an attack on the abbey, rather than a public meeting of burgesses. Captains were appointed and armed bands organized. At daybreak the rioting began with an attack on the new gild or market hall, recently erected by the abbey authorities because, as the chronicler remarks, "the town and market were theirs." The new hall was set on fire and totally destroyed. The next place to be attacked was the little church of St. Nicholas, which lay close to the abbey's great gate. The church was set on fire, but the fire was extinguished and the rioters were dispersed from in front of the gates by armed men, engaged by the abbey for its defence, who sallied out. Two of the townsmen were slain and several others captured and thrown into prison, there to await trial before the royal justices, as malefactors. The courage of the attacking party was somewhat dampened and the monks given a breathing space. Of this they took advantage to issue a proclamation, in the king's name, offering pardon to such of the rioters as would submit and surrender. Many took advantage of this offer and were taken into custody by the monks. The mild and easy-tempered abbot, John de Canynge, who had just returned from his country residence, smoothed matters down and freed those who had been captured in the conflict.²

Many of the townsmen, however, wished for revenge on the monks for the death of their comrades, and, not feeling strong enough by themselves, they sent messengers to Oxford, five miles away, to call the townsmen there to aid them. No English town in the Middle Ages had a more riotous or unruly populace than Oxford. There had been frequent conflicts betwixt town and gown; now both were given an opportunity to unite against a powerful monastic corporation, owning large property near the city, and against which they no doubt had a common feeling of hostility. The invitation of the Abingdon malcontents was readily accepted

¹ Wood's *Historia*, p. 162; Brit. Mus. MS. 28666, p. 155; Egerton Collection (B. M.), 282, p. 20.

² Brit. Mus. MSS., 28666, p. 156; Egerton MSS., 282, p. 20.

and a vast multitude from Oxford, headed by their mayor and prominent burgesses and accompanied by many of the more turbulent scholars, marched to Abingdon. On the way thither they destroyed the manor of Northcote, belonging to the abbey, and having entered Abingdon laid siege to the conventual buildings.¹ One of the great abbey gates was set on fire, in spite of the valiant defence of those within, who rained showers of stones and arrows on the attackers. Meanwhile others of the invading force had laid siege to the hospital of St. John, but met with so stout a resistance that an entrance could not be effected. Finally, however, a way was forced through the church of St. Nicholas and the rioters entered the abbey precincts. The gaol was immediately broken open and all the prisoners set free. Then the outer and inner gates of the monastery were set on fire and free ingress given to the rabble to plunder and pillage the monastic buildings. The terrified monks took sanctuary in the chapel, but this proved unavailing for Edmund de la Becke, leader of the attack, boldly invaded the sacred precincts with his followers, wounded one of the older monks and dragged the others away and thrust them into prison. Other unfortunate brethren fled with their abbot across the river and several of these were drowned in their hurried efforts to escape their pursuers. The abbey buildings were robbed of everything of value that they contained. Vestments, books, jewels and all such movables were taken away and much damage was wantonly done to the buildings. The treasury was emptied, and deeds and charters burnt and destroyed. Even the horses and cattle belonging to the monks were driven away.²

The day following the rioters held a meeting in Bagley Wood, between Abingdon and Oxford, at which three thousand were present. Messengers were dispatched to the prior and such monks as still remained in the convent. In fear and trembling the ecclesiastics came before the threatening assembly, which demanded certain concessions from them as representing the abbot and convent. The men of Abingdon were to have a provost and bailiffs of their own, who should be annually elected and have custody of the town. The abbot and convent were to abandon all rights they might claim to possess in Abingdon by royal charter, and they were to forego any action for damages, injuries and obligations that might ensue from the attack on the abbey by the rioters. These, with other less

¹ Egerton MS. 282, p. 21, which says: "Afterwards entering the town, they made such horrid noises that the unusualness of it even frightened those who had invited them thither."

² Brit. Mus. MS. 28666, p. 156; Egerton 282, p. 20; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, p. 288.

important demands, were incorporated in a charter and the prior and brethren were threatened with death to themselves, and the total destruction of the monastery, unless they assented in the name of the convent to this document. Under the circumstances little choice was left to them save compliance and the day following they took a solemn oath before a notary, to observe the articles of the charter. The abbey seal, which had been seized by the leaders of the rabble, was produced and the prior was forced to seal the charter with it. In addition bonds were exacted to the amount of £3000 that no one would be molested, vexed, or called in question for being concerned in these proceedings against the monastery.¹

Meanwhile tumult and disorder reigned in the town of Abingdon. The market rights of the abbot were freely encroached on; his portmoot court was interfered with, so that it could not be held; and his bailiffs, servants and officials of the abbey were attacked and beaten by the townsmen.² The troubles continued for over a fortnight, until, at the instance of the prior, the Bishop of St. David's visited the place and sought to restore peace and order.³ The abbot himself, who had fled on the occasion of the attack, made a successful appeal for royal protection. A commission consisting of four royal justices was directed to hear and determine the complaints and charges of the abbot against the men of Abingdon and Oxford.⁴ A writ was also issued to the sheriff of Oxford and Berks to cause proclamation to be made, prohibiting any one under pain of forfeiture, from invading by armed force the abbey of Abingdon, of the King's patronage, or any of its manors, or from attempting anything to the breach of the King's peace, or from inflicting damage or annoyance upon the abbot and monks in their persons or goods. Anyone doing any of these things was to be arrested, and if necessary the sheriff was to levy the *posse comitatus* to quell the revolt, and all malefactors taken were to be kept in prison until further notice. Finally, the King was to be notified concerning the proceedings, for he had learnt that the abbey was wasted and impoverished by the incursions of evil-doers and disturbers of the peace, and many of the monks driven away. Accordingly the abbey was to be under royal protection, together with its inmates, their lands and persons, and the sheriff was to exercise protection over them. A similar mandate was directed to the *conservatores pacis*,

¹ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, pp. 22-23; Brit. Mus. MS. 28666, p. 156; Egerton MS. 281, p. 21.

² *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, pp. 288-289.

³ Brit. Mus. MS. 28666, p. 159.

⁴ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, May 24, 1327.

or guardians of the peace, in the county of Berks, and these measures proved efficacious in subduing the revolt.¹

The next Sunday Abbot John de Canynge returned to his monastery with a bodyguard of gentlemen and archers. Many of the chief rioters fled from the town, others concealed themselves from justice; several of the latter were captured, however, and confined in Wallingford Castle. Later on they were tried before the royal justices and twelve of them were hanged. An even larger number would have suffered capital punishment had it not been for the mediation of the abbot, who interceded successfully on behalf of sixty of the culprits.² The losses which the abbey had sustained were very large, being estimated at over ten thousand pounds. So heavily crippled, indeed, was the great monastic corporation that in January 1328 the King, at the abbot's request, appointed two custodians to guard its revenues and interests.³ Certain of the stolen valuables, along with deeds and charters were recovered by the abbot, but much of irreparable value was completely lost.

The processes and commissions in connection with the troubles at Abingdon in 1327 are very numerous. They extend into the year 1330 and include indictments against the men of Oxford as well as those of Abingdon.⁴ Large numbers of the former were successively apprehended and tried, with the result that in many cases they were hanged for the part they had taken. Hundreds of offenders were condemned to death, fine, or imprisonment during the three years that followed the rising, and in the case of some of the chief offenders the proceedings dragged on several years longer on account of sentences of outlawry.⁵ The townsmen had to surrender their charter of liberties and privileges, extorted from the prior and monks, and go back to their former state of dependence on the abbot and convent, and also make good the losses sustained by the abbey. To this end they were prosecuted by Abbot Robert de Garford, who succeeded John de Canynge in December, 1328, and was a man of much sterner temper and disposition, and of greater decision and force than his predecessor had been.⁶ This

¹ For these writs see: *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, p. 125; *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1327-1330, pp. 201, 203.

² Brit. Mus. MS. 28666, p. 160; *Placita Coram Rege*, 1 Edw. III., Hilary term, roll 271, m. lviii. (Record Office).

³ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, p. 202; there is also a curious petition of the abbot and convent to the king, asking for the patronage of a church on account of their losses, in *Ancient Petitions* (Record Office), file 30, No. 1467.

⁴ Dugdale, *Monasticon*, I. 509; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, gives abstracts of these commissions.

⁵ *Ca'. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, pp. 458, 475.

⁶ Brit. Mus. MS. 28666, pp. 163 and 164.

abbot regained complete ascendancy over the town. The monastery, the hospital of St. John, the church of St. Nicholas and all other vulnerable points were fortified by royal license,¹ and, though conflicts occurred later between abbey and town, Abingdon remained, down to reformation times, a monastic town under the absolute control of abbot and convent.

The risings at St. Albans, Bury St. Edmunds, and Abingdon were the three great outbreaks of which we have detailed accounts. Other risings, however, occurred throughout England of which we have merely a passing mention but which, perhaps, were serious at the time. For example there is a royal letter to the sheriff of Bedford to take and put in prison certain armed men and malefactors who lie in wait for the prior of Dunstable. A century earlier Dunstable had been the scene of a serious conflict betwixt the monks and the townsmen, and no doubt the abbot's tenants took the opportunity in 1327 to again make trouble.² At Faversham, in Kent, and at Winchelsea, in Sussex, there are said to have been similar outbreaks on the part of the populace against ecclesiastical control and jurisdiction.³ The similarity of these movements, all occurring in the year 1327, seems to indicate clearly that there existed a wide-spread desire on the part of the burgesses, living under monastic control, to throw off the jurisdiction of their ecclesiastical lords at this particular time. No definite alliance, no inter-communal league, was formed between them. It was simply that the time was favorable for insurrection, and that the townsmen in many of these places were ready and eager to revolt at the first opportunity. Accordingly the year 1327 is remarkable in the annals of English municipal history for the number of risings that took place in the monastic towns. That these risings were without exception unsuccessful, has, I trust, been clearly shown. The punishment meted out to the rebellious burgesses was always severe ; so severe, indeed, that no further troubles of importance are known to have occurred in monastic towns until the great revolt of 1381.

In some respects the outbreaks which occurred in England, in 1327, are similar to the risings against the control of ecclesiastical lords that took place in the communes of Northern France, and in the German episcopal cities, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

¹ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, p. 547.

² *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327-1330, pp. 232-233 ; for the earlier conflict see *Annales Monastici*, R. S., III. 105-124, or the article on the history of the conflict in the *Cornhill Magazine*, VI. 835 ff.

³ *Brit. Mus. MS.* 28666, p. 164.

But the English monastic towns did not hold the important place in the national life of England held by the large and populous *Bischofsstädte* of the Continent. For while there the ecclesiastical towns led the others, in the struggle for liberty, the same class of towns in England were backward in obtaining privileges and immunities, being far outstripped in this, as in all other respects, by the royal boroughs. It was not until the second half of the thirteenth century that any general movement towards an assertion of their liberties is observable in the English monastic towns. The year 1327 marked the culmination of a period of secret discontent and conspiracy on the part of the townsmen under monastic control.

It is, however, by comparing the struggle in England with that of an earlier date on the Continent that we can best understand how it was that the struggle in the English monastic towns proved so fruitless. The Continental towns were, as has been remarked, much larger and of relatively greater importance than those of the same nature in England, and, consequently, the populace were superior in number, organization and influence. A long tradition of continuous municipal development and civic stability enabled them to offer a solidier opposition to their over-lord and to exert a greater influence on the politics of the day. Then too, the struggle on the Continent was generally one between the bishop by himself against the mass of townsmen by themselves. Royalty did not interfere, save in exceptional instances, and in fact rather favored the development of the municipal power as weakening and undermining the feudal. Then in France and Germany the townsmen had everything in their favor, and several other political factors of importance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries aided the efforts of the communes towards liberty and rendered their struggle a successful one. But in England all was different, and whenever the townsmen under the control of an abbot or prior made any efforts to win liberties and self-government the chances were all against the success of the movement. The ecclesiastical lords held their towns either by prescription or by royal charter, frequently by both, and no English king was inclined, unless his personal interests were involved, to deprive powerful religious bodies of rights long possessed and enjoyed by them, or granted to them by his predecessors. The royal power in fact was, as we have seen, exercised on the side of ecclesiastical domination and it formed the most effective support for the monks. Even if the townsmen made good their stand for a short time, as at St. Albans, their lord was almost certain to triumph in the end and reassert his rights over them. England was rarely, even during the Middle Ages, in such a state that

insurrection and violence could go long unpunished. The central authority was always powerful enough to interfere in the affairs of the towns and a resort to force on the part of the townsmen was sure to be severely punished. The strong alliance between Church and State which existed throughout the middle period made it certain in England that if ecclesiastical lords would not grant liberties to their burgesses peaceably, and few were inclined to do so, there was little hope of winning such liberties by force and violence.

Thus it was that the struggle, which took place in so many monastic towns, in 1327, ended so disastrously for the townsmen. They gained nothing in the way of greater liberty and self-government, nay, rather they lost something, in that the control of the abbot and convent over them was strengthened and they sank back in the scale of municipal development. What little result these risings may have had was to teach the ecclesiastical corporations the danger and folly of driving the townsmen too far and of keeping too strict a hand over them. As an interesting phase of English municipal history the risings in the monastic towns in 1327 are worthy of note, for they show the strength and influence of the monastic system in England, and how in many a town the monastic corporation was able to beat down and suppress the growing municipal spirit of the time, though we cannot but agree with the unknown versifier who wrote :

“ Saint Benet made never none of them
To have lordship of man nor town.”

NORMAN MACLAREN TRENHOLME.